

# WE ALL NEED TO GROW UP

We are used to thinking of the world in terms of mass. Big things like nation states, religions, society, the media. We are used to expecting those big things to look after us and protect us. But the Internet splits those up and breaks them apart. It is made up of networks of individuals, each with their own voice. If we are going to survive the changes we need to see in our institutions we need to help them find that voice. We need to help them grow up.

There is something inherently personal about the social tools we will be talking about in this book. From the early days of blogging, when there was much talk of authenticity and finding your voice, to the amazing openness and transparency being exhibited in Facebook by unbelievable numbers of people, the emphasis has been on the individual and their particular take on the world around them. This is the first time that we have each had our own capacity to broadcast our ideas on a global scale in this way and for virtually no cost.

The patterns we are seeing in our use of the Internet are all part of the ongoing and inevitable ebb and flow of power between the individual and society. Whether it is the state, or the multinational corporation, or the churches of our major religions – between which there are more similarities than most people like to admit – how we relate to the large and powerful bodies that influence so much of our lives is what is at stake here. Your IT department is locking down access to Facebook and the state attempting to legislate to protect us from ourselves. There is a seemingly inevitable tendency for those in power to want to close things down and wield authority to maintain the status quo. At the same time individuals, of whatever political or even religious persuasion, embrace the ability the web gives them to have a voice.

There has been nothing like this since the printing press and its impact will be on a similar scale. The printing press, and the easy access to ideas that it enabled, fuelled the Reformation in Europe and this was driven by the desire to be able to read the Bible in languages other than the official Latin. The church went to the extreme of burning people in their attempts to resist this process so we can be pretty sure it was as much about power as it was about piety. The courage of those who embraced this new freedom to think for themselves ultimately led to the Enlighten-

ment and to our modern world view. If, as many of us believe, the web is taking us on the next step in this journey of self-expression and self-determination, where we are even cutting out the publishers of our words, it's likely that it will have the same profound long-term effect on our culture and our philosophies as did the printing press.

The alternatives to maintaining the familiar structures and behaviours of modern society are portrayed as beyond the pale. Words like chaos and anarchy are used to create the impression that without the grown-ups looking after us catastrophe would inevitably ensue. In the world of work, fitting in with corporate culture is seen as necessary and anyone straying too far from the norm is soon pulled back. Thinking too much is seen as a bad thing in many workplaces and "having ideas above your station" a frequent admonishment. I am not pretending that people don't behave badly or that companies don't have to manage their relationships with customers and stakeholders carefully, but in doing so they severely limit what is possible. Will chaos really ensue if we don't keep a lid on things? Is this only true because we have been trained to act like children and expect others to make our decisions for us?

There is always a tendency to blame the sins of the previous generation on the behaviour of the new one. Whether it is television, rock and roll, or the Internet, it is all too easy to demonize the new and unfamiliar and to blame it for society's ills. Those in authority are prone to knee-jerk reactions when things go wrong – to blame what is only understood by a minority and to prey on the fears of the majority. We see this in corporations' paranoia about Facebook and governments blaming social tools for upheavals in society. But they are all just tools. Tools used by people to do things they care about. If we are not happy with what we are using those tools for then we need to think hard about what we deem important.

We will only be able to take full advantage of the networked world if we grow up, think for ourselves, and take responsibility for our lives and our actions. I am not naïve. I know that, at least to begin with, truly thinking for yourself and saying what you think with any degree of authenticity is a big ask. It may never happen for many people. There may just be too much at stake and too much to take into account for a politician or someone in a corporate setting to really be authentic. But I am hopeful. There are enough examples already where people have managed to tread that line. Managed to be real, to have a personality, and yet at the same time acknowledge the fact that they are “representing” a sector of society or a multinational corporation. It can be done.

**Things to remember:**

- Social tools are personal. They rely on individuals like you and me finding our voice.
- The Internet, like the printing press, is part of the ongoing process of humanity growing up.
- Power is shifting from institutions and corporations to networks and individuals.
- Chaos needn't be the only alternative to our current ways of controlling society.
- We need to grow up and take responsibility for our views and their impact.